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BILL: House Bill 785 - Freedom to Read Act

DATE: February 19, 2024

POSITION: FAVORABLE

COMMITTEE: Ways and Means

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Annapolis Pride's mission is to advocate for, empower, and celebrate our LGBTQ+ community in Anne Arundel County to live fully and authentically. Our vision is a safe, equitable, and anti-racist community where people of all identities thrive. As such, Annapolis Pride supports House Bill 785- the Freedom to Read Act.

Our nation's libraries and librarians are under attack. In the first eight months of 2023, the American Library Association reported challenges to nearly 2,000 unique titles representing a 20% increase over the same period in 2022. Even in our state, small groups of people are attempting to tell Marylanders what they can and cannot read and are threatening library staff for providing a diverse collection of materials. Our own Anne Arundel County has faced both direct and indirect attempts to censor materials available at the library.

By far, book bans target books on race or racism featuring characters of color, as well as books with LGBTQ+ characters. Ensuring access to a diverse range of books is crucial for the intellectual and emotional development of individuals, particularly young people. Books provide not only knowledge but also empathy and perspective. They help readers explore different experiences and ideas, fostering understanding and connection.

All people deserve to see themselves reflected in library books. Why does representation matter? According to the Trevor Project, LGBTQ youth who found their school or community to be LGBTQ-affirming reported **lower rates of attempting suicide**. Removing or restricting queer books in libraries and schools is like cutting a lifeline for queer youth.

Some argue that book bans protect children. Indeed, parents have the right to guide their children's reading, but they should not be making decisions for other people's kids. Books are tools for understanding complex issues and foster an important trait, empathy. Limiting people's access to books does not protect them from life's challenges, it merely shuts down their ability to truly understand themselves and the world around them. And it represents a real threat to our democracy.

Accordingly, Annapolis Pride respectfully requests a **favorable** report on House Bill 522.